

APPARATUS CLAIMS:

1. An apparatus facilitating the placing conferenced multiple outbound telephone calls, comprising:

- a. an internet-connected computer for receiving dialing information over the internet;
- b. an outbound call engine capable for placing a plurality of outbound telephone calls, said call engine responsive to said dialing information;
- c. call conferencing means capable of connecting a plurality of outbound telephone calls together;-
- d. a database comprising "allowed times" when customers have specified they are willing to receive calls, and "allowed callers" from whom customers are willing to receive calls;-
- e. means for automatically communicating said allowed times to callers who attempt to initiate calls outside said allowed times; and
- f. enabling means for enabling said outbound call engine only when said allowed time and allowed caller criteria are met.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said ~~database~~ ~~further comprises enabled caller criteria identifying for each customer which other customers are enabled to call, and said call engine will only place calls to connect customers when said enabled caller criteria is met.~~ allowed time criteria is separately definable for different allowed callers.

8. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said enabled caller information further comprises for each customer

allowed contact time windows during which calls will be accepted from other customers, further comprising means to automatically notify a customer by e-mail when an enabled caller's last allowed contact time windows have expired.

9. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein customers from whom calls will be accepted can be defined as a group.

10. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein said dialing information for a customer calling as a member of a group includes both group-identifying information and individual-customer-identifying information.

11. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein said call-acceptance criteria further comprises call-blocking information specifying for each customer any individual customers from whom calls will not be accepted.

13. The apparatus of claim 7, further comprising call-acceptance criteria specifying which customers can call a given customer and which criteria are modifiable via a website by said given customer.

15. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising:
means for timing telephone connection time;
means for calculating charges based on telephone connection time; and

wherein said database further comprises past charges accrued for each customer and billability status for customers, indicating whether each customer is billable for calls they set up, and whether they are billable for calls others set up to them, wherein billability status for each customer with respect to each other customer may be individually defined.

22. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said database further comprises call scheduling information, and conferenced outbound telephone calls may be scheduled in

advance and placed at pre-determined times, and call schedule data for a given customer may be accessed and modified by that customer via a website.

23. The apparatus of claim 7, further comprising means for playing to a call recipient at the beginning of a call an audio announcement identifying the other party to said call, and means for including in said audio announcement information about the last time said other party placed a conferenced outbound call between himself and said recipient.

25. The apparatus of claim 7, further comprising means for playing to a call recipient at the beginning of a call an audio greeting in said call recipient's own voice.

27. The apparatus of claim 11, further comprising automatic means for sending an e-mail notification to a customer if someone said customer has designated as blocked tries to set up a call to said customer.

29. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a web-based dialing directory with clickable representations of numbers to be dialed.

30. The apparatus of claim 7, further comprising means for encrypting membership numbers of other members as seen by a given member, based on the given member's own member number, and wherein customers are identified to each other through said database by uniquely encrypted member numbers.

31. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising privacy-protected mail means for leaving a private message for an intended call recipient if an intended recipient is not reachable, said voice mail being retrievable only by the intended recipient through the use of private member-identification information.

32. The apparatus of claim 31, further comprising inbound call receiving means allowing retrieval of privacy-protected voice mail by dialing a number and entering member identification information.

33. The apparatus of claim 7, further comprising means allowing any member to automatically generate a temporary membership number for a prospective member, and means to automatically generate a permanent membership for that prospective member when that prospective member uses said temporary membership number to become a member, and automatically replace occurrences of said temporary membership number in said database with member numbers uniquely related to said permanent member number.

34. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising means for serving a web page indicative of call placement progress.

35. The apparatus of claim 34, further comprising means to serve a web page allowing call placement options of an intended call does not go through.

36. The apparatus of claim 35, further comprising means for periodically checking a busy line, and setting up a call when said line stops being busy.

37. The apparatus of claim 36, further comprising timing means to stop the checking of the busy line after a customer-specified amount of time.

38. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said database further comprises for each customer phone numbers at which said customer can be contacted, and further comprising web-based sign-up and account access means, and automated outbound call placement during sign-up, wherein said outbound calls are placed to all contact numbers specified for the person signing up, and proper PIN code entry is

required during said automated calls during sign-up in order to validate phone numbers to be called to reach said person.

40. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said database further comprises information for each customer indicating at what phone numbers said customer can be dialed.

41. The apparatus of claim 40, wherein said database further comprises for each customer said customer's preferences as to what phone said customer is allowed to be called at and at what times.

42. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said database further comprises for each customer what phone numbers said customer is reachable at by any particular other customer.

43. The apparatus of claim 7, wherein said database further comprises for each customer past call information including time of each call and member number of calling or called party, and further comprising means for serving up such past call information as web page data.

44. The apparatus of claim 43, further comprising means for disabling or enabling callers in response to web click data received from a browser viewing said past call information.

46. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said database further comprises for each customer professional services rate information, and further comprising means to charge customers for professional service time of a called party in addition to connection charges.

47. The apparatus of claim 46, further comprising means for serving up web-based schedule information for professional service providers, allowing web-based sign-up for paid telephone time with professional service providers.

48. The apparatus of claim 23, further comprising means for a called party to initiate automatic delivery of a pre-recorded audio message to a caller prior to and in place of connecting said caller to said called party.

METHOD CLAIMS

49. A method of doing business comprising auctioning professional service time on the web.

50. A method of fund-raising comprising auctioning teleconference time with celebrities on the web, automatically calling high bidders and connecting them to said teleconference, and automatically billing teleconference participants the amounts they bid to be on said teleconference.

51. A method for placing conferenced multiple outbound telephone calls, comprising:

- a. Receiving dialing information specifying a call-initiating party, a call-receiving party, and a call time over the internet;
- b. checking within a database to verify that said call time is within allowed contact time window criteria set up by said call-receiving party regarding a call-initiating party;
- c. checking within a database to verify that said call-initiating party is specified as an allowed caller by said call-receiving party;
- d. placing a plurality of outbound telephone calls in response to said dialing information only if said call time falls within said allowed

contact time window criteria and said call-
initiating party is listed as an allowed caller by
said call receiving party;

de. connecting said multiple outbound calls
together as a conference call in response to both
called parties answering said calls.

53. The method of claim 51 wherein said conferencing connection is done external to a telephone company switch.

54. The method of claim 51 wherein the connecting of said outbound calls further comprises sending digital network commands to a telephone carrier switch to offload and maintain the connection.

59. The method of claim 51, further comprising checking allowed group contact criteria if said dialing information indicates that said call-initiating party is initiating said call as a member of a call-enabled group, and placing said call only if said group is currently contact-enabled by said call-receiving party.

60. The method of claim 59, wherein said calling information is indicative of both individual information and group information.

61. The method of claim 60, wherein said group must be currently enabled and said individual must not be currently disabled for said call-receiving party within said database in order for said conferenced calls to be placed.

63. The method of claim 51, further comprising serving up customer information as a web page, and accepting customer modification of customer call setup and call-receiving parameters via the internet.

66. The method of claim 51, wherein said database further comprises billability status, and where billability

status may include fully billable status, split-billing status, or non-billable status, and wherein the billability status of each customer may be individually defined with respect to every other customer..

67. A method of placing an international telephone call between a calling party and a called party, comprising initiating outbound telephone calls to said called party and said calling party through an internet-based interface, and connecting said outbound calls together after both said parties answer said outbound calls.68. The method of claim 67, wherein said calling party is in a first country, and said called party is in a second country, and said outbound telephone calls originate from a third country.

71. A method for placing long-distance telephone calls at optimized rates, comprising supplying a calling party's number and a called party's number through a website, selecting a telecommunications provider to connect said called party and said calling party based on rate information, placing outbound calls to said called party and said calling party, and connecting said called party to said calling party after both said parties answer said outbound calls.72. The method of claim 51, further comprising automatically making conferenced outbound calls at times scheduled in advance in said database.

73. The method of claim 51, further comprising automatically playing to said call-receiving party at the beginning of a call an audio announcement identifying the other party to said call, and allowing said call recipient to deliver an audio message to said calling party without being connected to said calling party.

74. The method of claim 73, further comprising automatically playing to said call-receiving party at the

beginning of a call audio information about the time the call-initiating party last called.

75. The method of claim 51, further comprising playing to the call-receiving party at the beginning of a call an audio greeting in the call-receiving party's own voice.

76. A system for establishing a real-time communications connection between a user and a selected information service provider for a live, real-time conversation, the system comprising:

a communications interface; and

a controller computer linked with the communications interface, the controller computer having:

a first logic unit to provide a list of information service providers from a wide array of fields of service to the user;

a second logic unit, in response to the user selecting the selected information service provider from the list, to assign the user a position in a queue when one or more other users have also selected the selected information service provider, the queue having a plurality of other positions, each occupied by one of the one or more of other users waiting to communicate with the selected information provider;

a third logic unit to receive a bid from the user when the user desires to advance position within the queue;

a fourth logic unit to compare the bid with each price being offered by each of the one or more other users, such that each price being offered by each of the one or more other

users is initially equal to a price charged by the selected information service provider for providing services in a live, real-time conversation with the user;

a fifth logic unit to advance the user to a position in the queue ahead of each other positions occupied by each other users whose price is lower than the bid; and

a sixth logic unit to establish a real-time communications connection via the communications interface between the user and the selected information service provider for the live real time conversation when the user advances to a first position in the queue and the selected information service provider is available to communicate with the user.